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Africa Review

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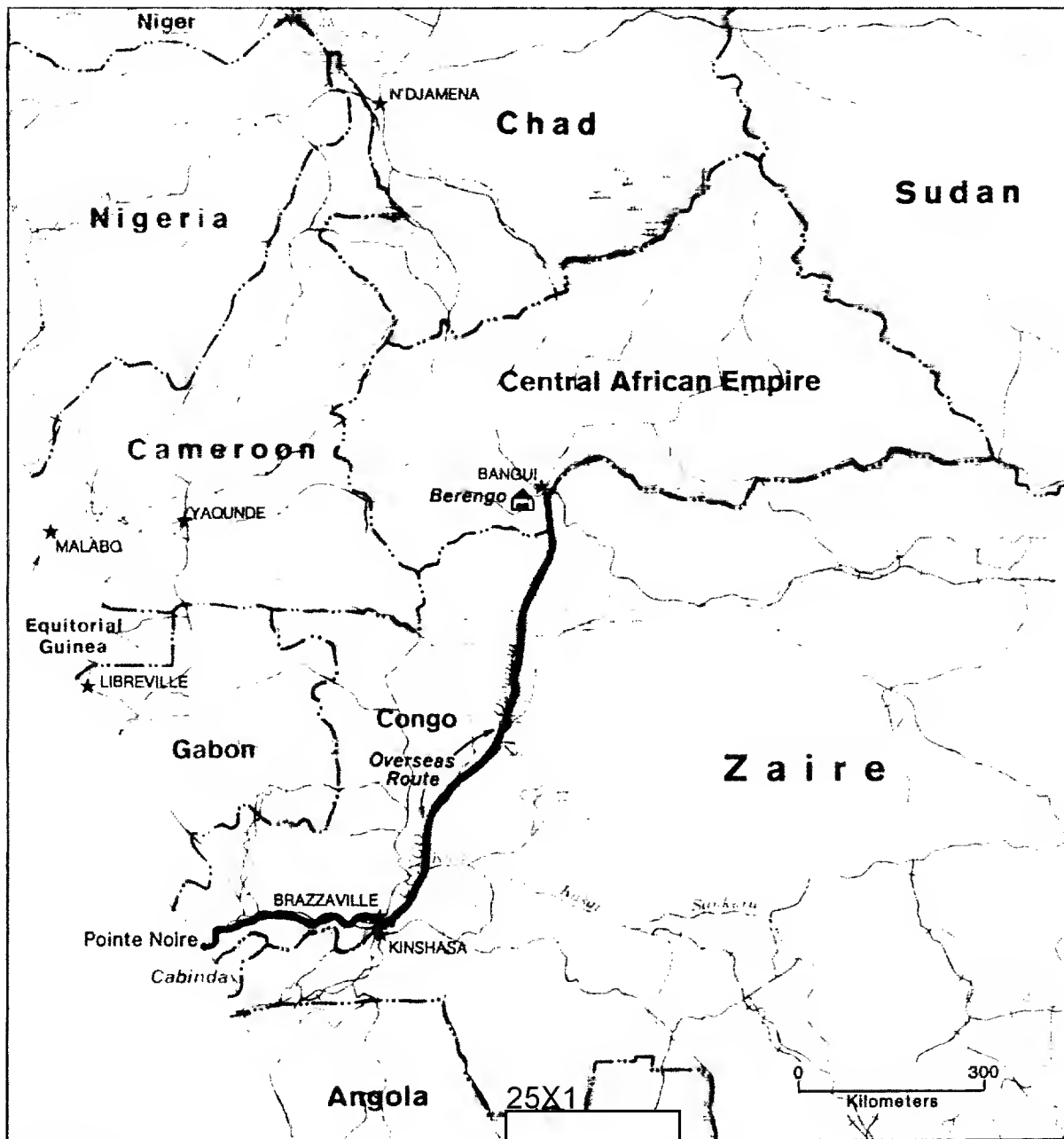
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Central African Empire: Demonstrations in Bangui

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Street riots in the Central African Empire's (CAE) capital city of Bangui that began on 18 January and lasted through most of last weekend are the first open demonstrations in recent years against the increasingly repressive rule of Emperor Jean Bedel Bokassa. Although the riots and the excesses of CAE security forces in restoring order have weakened the Emperor's position, his authority does not appear immediately threatened. Since he seized power in a bloodless coup in January 1966, Bokassa has masterfully neutralized potential opponents by either keeping them under his thumb or sending them into political exile. More disturbances are possible, given Bokassa's apparent unwillingness to come to grips with the economic problems that sparked the unrest.

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The demonstrations began when a number of primary and secondary school students were denied admission to class for not wearing school uniforms required by a recent imperial decree. Disgruntled university students and other residents of the African section of the capital quickly joined in. Order was restored to Bangui on Sunday after the Emperor dispatched elements of his elite personal guard from his private retreat at Berengo, 50 kilometers outside the capital. Schools are open but under heavy security.

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Earlier press reports of Zairian troops being sent to quash the disturbances are apparently false. Zairian President Mobutu has heatedly denied the allegations,

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During the demonstrations, Bokassa called in parents and student representatives and, in a long tirade, absolved himself of any blame for the riots and implicated senior government officials, other "political elements," and Lebanese traders. By involving high-level

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civil servants, Bokassa may be laying the groundwork for another cabinet or a reprisal against convenient scapegoats. The Lebanese, who dominate much of the country's commerce, are a favorite target when the Emperor seeks to rally popular support for his regime. [REDACTED] 25X1

Most of the fighting apparently took place in the African section of Bangui, but looting and burning have been reported in other parts of the city. [REDACTED] 25X1

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[REDACTED]

The high point came Saturday night with a free-for-all involving troops and students armed with spears and arrows. Preliminary casualty estimates range from 50 to 100, all Africans. The expatriate community has been spared so far, although four Zairian civilians were reportedly killed and two of the Emperor's French pilots were roughed up during the Saturday night melee. [REDACTED]

Economic Malaise

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Underlying the latest unrest is the steady decline in urban living standards during the past several years. Bokassa's personal extravagances, epitomized by his \$25 million coronation ceremony a year ago last December, and a weak economy have depleted the country's meager coffers and forced the government to live from hand to mouth. Grossly inefficient government-owned enterprises and corruption also siphon off public funds. At the same time, budgetary shortfalls frequently force civil servants and members of the military to wait months for their paychecks, while paying high prices for housing, food, and other essentials. For those outside the expatriate or African elite communities, even the most basic social services--electricity and running water--are lacking. [REDACTED]

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The limited economic progress under Bokassa has been irregular and largely the result of French and other foreign assistance. Real growth during the past several years has barely kept pace with the population

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increase; most of the impetus has emanated from government spending and other nonproductive services. Agriculture--the CAE's principal source of foreign exchange and leading economic activity--has lagged because of inadequate producer prices and other government support. Most production is on a subsistence basis, while Bangui has to rely on expensive imports for the bulk of its food supply. A small manufacturing sector suffers from a lack of demand, raw materials, and spare parts. []

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Economic performance has also been affected by an inadequate transport network. The primitive internal distribution system hampers the movement of goods outside of Bangui. In addition, the country's primary overseas route--the 1,600-kilometer river/rail route connecting Bangui with the Congolese port of Pointe Noire--is not very reliable. During the dry season, the Oubangui River is frequently too shallow for large rivercraft, and on more than one occasion Congolese authorities have held up the flow of CAE goods because of overdue accounts. []

Outlook

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The possibility of future outbursts cannot be ruled out. Bokassa's meeting with demonstrators last Saturday revealed he has little appreciation for the financial squeeze his people face. Neither did the meeting reveal that Bokassa has any intention of taking remedial measures. He has consistently refused to make the long-term commitment necessary for any lasting improvements in the current economic situation and will continue to rely on foreign assistance to see him through.

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The riots will almost certainly prompt Bokassa to keep a closer watch on CAE internal affairs and reinforce his basic mistrust of all except his closest associates. The Emperor has gradually isolated himself at his Berengo retreat since his coronation, a marked contrast to previous years when few things escaped his attention. What reprisals he will take beyond

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a likely government reshuffle are unknown; the traditional train of events usually includes imprisonment followed by public reconciliation or political exile.

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Although Bokassa's position has been weakened, his ability to keep his political opponents off guard and removed from any potential power base sharply limits their chances--at least over the short run--of taking advantage of popular unrest to organize a move against the Emperor. As evidenced by its performance during the disturbances, the key imperial guard appears loyal to the Emperor. The Army also seems to present little threat to Bokassa, who has deliberately kept his troops unarmed.

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